

The West Obituaries

Edited by Len Findlay

FEB. 28th

2006

Champion rowed many a mile to be a winner

DONALD HOWARD FRASER

Born: Subiaco, July 1914

Died: Perth, February 2006

Don Fraser once reckoned he had rowed 22,500km in a long and distinguished career. And maybe he didn't coach 22,500 young rowers but the numbers ran into thousands.

In 17 years of competitive rowing for the WA Rowing Club, he won 19 State titles, rowed in the Kings Cup four times and won a gold medal in the coxed fours at the old Empire (now Commonwealth) Games in 1938 in Sydney. Also in 1938 he stroked the WA team to victory in the Kings Cup.

He coached Guildford Grammar School for one year when it won the Head of the River title. In 18 years as Christ Church coach (from 1957), his rowers were never out of the top three, with six firsts, six seconds and six thirds.

In addition, he was a highly successful businessman, an accomplished public speaker until very late in his life and reached the rank of captain during his service in World War II. And he had the first powered catamaran on the Swan River, the *Aderlon*, which could do Fremantle to Rottnest in 25 minutes. "It was FAST," said his son, Peter.

Donald Howard Fraser was born on July 27, 1914, at 8 Francis Street, Subiaco. His father, Ken, had a shop in Subiaco, selling Manchester goods and his mother, Alice (Smith), helped him in the store. He had a sister, Mollie, who was four years younger.

After primary school in Subiaco, he sat for and passed the scholarship exam to enter Perth Modern School and it was during his first year there that he began swimming with the school team. He was school champion from his second year until he left.

Don then went to the University of WA to study engineering and graduated with second-class honours, a full Blue for rowing and a half-Blue for swimming. "If I hadn't enjoyed my rowing so much," he said later, "I could have passed with first class honours and a half Blue in the sports."

His training regime was mostly on the water. "There is more emphasis now on gymnasium and exercise,"



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Games in Sydney and was in the crew that brought Australia victory in the 2km event, winning by 1.25 lengths from New Zealand in a time of 7min.17sec with Canada third.

Don joined the army in 1941 and

Peter, who also became a rower, was born on July 25, 1952. Don and Adeline divorced in 1971 and the following year he married Jahanne Roberts, who had a daughter, Karen. They divorced in 2000.

His engineering business was started in 1947 and through the 1950s and 1960s became one of the biggest in the State. His company built the Perth Concert Hall, Perth's Council House, several major swimming pools and had many contract jobs for Mount Newman Mining and Hamersley Iron.

He opened offices in Bunbury, Canberra and Melbourne and employed more than 70 people. Don still held his builder's licence when he was over 80 and remained a judge for the Housing Industry Awards.

For most of his life he was a Freemason, rising to the rank of Worshipful Master of the University Lodge.

The Cottesloe Surf Lifesaving Club was another passion and his name is on the honour board for his work as a senior swimmer, the belt swimmer in Rescue and Resuscitate and a spell as captain after the war.

"Towards the end, he had to be helped into the water," said Peter, "but once he was in - wow!"

He was a member of the Royal Freshwater Bay Yacht Club and the Royal Perth Yacht Club, each for more than 50 years and he never forgot Christ Church. The Don Fraser Club was set up by pupils who had asked him to be patron. The club saw former Head of the River rowers gather to give support to the emerging talent.

He gave many talks and WA Rowing Club captain Caine Holdsworth said Don spoke at the clubhouse centenary last year. WARC was founded during the 1800s, making it the oldest club in the State, though the current heritage-listed clubhouse was built in 1905.

Mr Holdsworth said hearing Don speak about the early days of rowing was a great privilege and his amusing anecdotes were a hit with the crowd on the night.

"Don was the highlight of the evening and clearly still had a spark about him at 91. He will be sorely missed at Westies and is a great loss to the rowing community," he said.

said son, Peter, "but he got out and did the miles in the boat."

A common training row was from the old Majestic Hotel at Applecross to the old Swan Brewery, almost 5km. He was chosen for the 1938 Empire

became a captain, working as a design engineer for patrol boats and other equipment. He served most of his time in Melbourne. It was there that he met Adeline Helm, a draftsman. They married on July 28, 1945, and

Don died on February 6, five weeks after Adeline. He leaves Peter and Karen. "And he was so fit until the end," said Peter "that he could still crush your hand in a handshake."
LEN FINDLAY